

What the king ate? On the ambivalence towards eating meat during the second half of the 1st millennium BCE

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The middle of the last millennium BCE, overlapping the late post-Vedic and also the *śramaṇa*¹ period, was the most decisive phase for the development of the culture of the Indian subcontinent which, according to historians, signals the beginning of Indian history.² During this time (7th–5th centuries BCE), tribal kingdoms (some call these political formations ‘republics’ and kingdoms, cf. Thapar 1969, 50 ff.) were the first political formations of a single nation/tribe or of several.

The aim of this study is to highlight the formative forces that largely contributed to an ambivalence towards eating meat, and yet the partaking of it. Extrapolating information on the topic from less-examined sources, I shall offer a variety of arguments,³ including some concerning *karman*, which became a powerful catalyst, not only in other contexts and in different traditions, but also as regards the issue of eating meat. If we observe the term *karman* as used in the Veda *Samhitās*, there is an implied cause and effect relationship in the performance of ritual acts. The ritual is supposed to occasion some favourable resolution for the human condition, to sustain an order that supports everything, one could say. In the late Vedic period, concurrent with the *Brāhmaṇa* period, it becomes apparent that the term carries increasingly complex nuances that no longer pertain merely to actions, but also to intentions. Another carry-

1. Olivelle 1993, 11 ff. Regarding *śramaṇa*, ‘this term is used frequently in post-Vedic literature and in inscriptions with reference to various types of ascetics. Buddhist and Jain canonical texts use it frequently to designate Buddhist and Jain monks’.

2. Kulke–Rothermund 19983, 49.

3. Some arguments will not be explored here in detail, but only mentioned summarily at the end, even though they are worthy of closer attention. For example, the idea that an increased prevalence of domesticated animals led to their becoming accountable property and hence necessarily subjected to more control regarding their use. Scarcity of food should not be overlooked since it definitely influenced some of the eating customs, such as women in households eating last. The influence of Jain animism deserves a separate study altogether.

over from the Vedic ritual is the so-called distribution of the sacrificed matter or, in a certain context, the oblations (i.e., 'leavings'). These can be considered the main contributing catalysts in the development of the food habits of South Asia. And yet, the *śramaṇa* influence cannot be neglected either.

Two kinds of sources will be utilized here for these purposes: Buddhist sources and Brahmanical Epics.⁴

The early Buddhist period gives evidence not only of the Buddhist heritage but also of the Brahmanical tradition, along with the co-existing practices of other religious developments, such as the Jain. None of these religious developments ever existed in isolation, although this is the manner in which they were, and still are, usually studied and examined; in fact, they bear heavily on each other's formation and development. As James Fitzgerald has shown in his incisive study of the *Mahābhārata*,⁵ we can find tangible evidence of the *Mahābhārata*'s trying to wrest the dominion of the Brahmanical culture from the impact/influence of the Buddhist and Aśokan ideologies, and also from their policies.

Aśokan inscriptions provide reliable testimony for some of Aśoka's policies effecting dietary restrictions, proclaiming that the royal kitchen will abstain from killing numerous animals daily, save for three, namely, two peacocks and an antelope, and the latter not consistently/regularly (Rock Edict #1 Girnar). Quoting from King Aśoka's first edict:

Formerly in the kitchen of King Dēvānāmpriya Priyadarśin many hundred thousands of animals were killed daily for the sake of curry.⁶ But now, when this rescript on morality is written, only three animals are being killed [daily] for the sake of the curry, [viz.] two peacocks [and] one deer, but even this deer not regularly, even these three animals shall not be killed in future.⁷

In general, it is understood that this change of policy for the royal kitchen was

4. The term 'Brahmanical' does not only pertain to Brahmins but also to the identification of the culture and people later known as 'Hindu'.

5. Fitzgerald 2004, 53-54.

6. Hultzsich 1925, 2, translated *sūpa* as 'curry', others translate soups as cognate to *supa* in Prākṛit as well as in Sanskrit (*sūpa*) meaning a complex dish with a legume liquid base containing a number of other food items.

7. *Ibid.* Hultzsich's translation of I. The Girnar Rock, Line 7 (F), p. 1 in Texts and Translations. The original reads as follows (transcribed from the *devanāgarī* text, without emendations suggested in the footnotes): (F) *purā mahānasamhi devānāmpriyasa priyadasino raño anudivasam bahūni prānasatasahasrāni ārabhisu sūpāthāya (G) se aja yadā ayam dhammalipi likhitā tī eva prānā ārabhare sūpāthāya dvo morā eko mago so pi mago na dhruvo (H) ete pi trī prānā pachā na ārabhisare*. A comprehensive reading of the edicts of Aśoka is presented in Bloch 1950, where he offered five versions of the edicts, as they were found in their respective locations. Since this study is not about Aśoka edicts, I have adopted Hultzsich's presentation based on the edict from Girnar.

instigated by Aśoka's particular version of Buddhism, which he assumed and propagated in his realm after he had almost completely overpowered the peninsula and, for the first time, solidified his power over a large area that eventually became India, i.e., Bharat. Such restrictions were followed by others that led to a minimization of the consumption of meat. Prolonged exposure and contact with communities and societies, such as the Jains, led to a possible assimilation of their ways of life. Furthermore, certain semi-restrictions, such as the Buddha's specific approach to eating meat, were adopted. Just as a monk begging for food does not make 'judgments', such as, I like this and I do not like that, begged food should not be favoured or disliked, but accepted, shared with one's community, and eaten without preference or dismissal. This was the general rule, with the only exception being when the animal was slaughtered for the sake of feeding the monk. In such a case, the monk was not permitted to eat the meat. The rule by which it is permissible to eat meat and fish is called *tikoṭiparisuddham*, which means blameless in all three ways, that is, not seen, not heard, and not suspected (*adiṭṭham*, *asutaṃ*, *aparisaṅkitaṃ*, respectively).⁸

There were also certain animals, such as elephants, horses, dogs, snakes, lions, tigers, leopards, bears, and hyenas that were not to be eaten. And as could be expected, the consumption of humans was not permitted either.⁹ So when a monk received meat, he was obliged to examine it for its colour and form (*rūpa*) and determine whether or not it was one of the prohibited animals.

Given the title of the current paper, one might be prompted to imagine a lavish spread on which the king¹⁰ and his court were feasting. But I should like to relate a different type of story of the king's diet. The Buddhist sources, as the *Suttanipāṭa*, allow us to glean information about a king's fare, depicted as both healing and invigorating. The description portrays two steps, first a vegetarian and then a meat diet, cleverly devised from the habits of scavenging animals whose source of meat is the leavings of wild animals.

The attitude towards animal fare does not seem to be univocal and what is documented in the texts of the various traditions, be they Brahmanical, Bud-

8. Alsdorf 1962, 563, n. 1. Prasad 1979, 290, where he shows how this rule of restriction (but not prohibition) came about, drawing on the Vinaya texts of the different schools in three languages, Pāli, Sanskrit and Chinese. He employs the narrative of Sīha, who heard of the Buddha preaching on inaction. He became curious and went to listen to the Buddha and then invited the Buddha with his monks for a meal. The Buddha's adversaries spread the rumour that he and his monks had partaken of a non-vegetarian meal prepared solely for them, even though the meat came from a butcher's shop, 'meat procured from market, *pavattamaṃsa*' (literally, *pavattamaṃsa* means 'fresh meat'). Afterwards, the Buddha in his customary fashion, whenever there was a misconception, misunderstanding, or misinterpretation provided a rule to take care of the given controversy. Thus in this instance too: the rule of blamelessness in three ways that is discussed here. The reference to the three descriptives which Prasad gives here is *Vinaya Piṭaka* I, 233-38.

9. Cf. Prasad 1979, 295, n. 13, with reference to *Vinaya Piṭaka* I, 218-220.

10. 'King' in this paper refers to the *kṣatriya* class, aiming to separate their customs and experience from other social classes.

dhist, etc., does at times seem contradictory. But this has not always been so. Ascetics living in the wilderness certainly partook of the meat killed by predatory animals and birds. Scholars like Wezler,¹¹ Olivelle,¹² and others have inquired into these issues. An example from the commentary on the *Suttanipāṭa*, called *Paramatthajotikā* II (355.3-14),¹³ gives the narrative of a certain King Rāma, who was ill with leprosy and hence gave up his harem and his kingship, entrusting them to his eldest son.

During his time in the wilderness, the king first lived on leaves, roots, and fruits, recovering from his illness and even developing a radiant complexion. Once, in the course of his wanderings, he came upon the hollow of a tree, and made this into his living quarters. He built a fire from twigs and wood and stayed up all night listening to the sounds of the forest. In one direction, he recognized the roar of a lion and, in the other, the cry of a tiger. At daybreak, he went to the two places in their opposite directions, towards the respective sounds of the wild beasts from the night before. Finding the remnants of the kill (meat-leavings, *vighāsamaṃsam*), he took the meat, cooked it, and ate it.

*So 'asukasmīṇ padese sīho saddam akāsi, asukasmīṇ vyaggho 'ti sallakkhetvā pabhāte tattha gantvā vighāsamaṃsam ādāya pacitvā khādati.*¹⁴

This narrative provides us with anecdotal evidence for the consumption of meat when it became available without the person having had to engage in its killing. Certainly, during his life in the palace, this king would have gone hunting, and so a meat diet would not have been strange to him, but there is a major difference here. The king now dwells in the forest and is no longer a hunter and he is not in charge of the killing. Several texts, as Alsdorf observed,¹⁵ consider meat ripped up by wild beasts suitable for consumption according to Brahmanical theory, for example, *Manu* 5.131, *Yājñavalkya* 1.192, and *Vasiṣṭha* 14.27.¹⁶

Evidence of a forest-dweller (*vanaprastha*)¹⁷ surviving on meat leavings from wild animals is also found in the *Jātaka Gāthās* (6.81.14-15). Wezler,¹⁸ in

11. Wezler 1978, 100 ff.

12. Olivelle 1991, 23 ff. Here we find a classification of ascetics according to the way they obtain food and the method of food intake, p. 24, preceded by an explanation of fear of food. On p. 25 there is an enumeration of five classes of hermits who cook. Among these, the first group eats anything they find in the forest; these are of two kinds: one eats only plant products, and the other eats the flesh of animals killed by carnivorous beasts.

13. Wezler 1978, 101.

14. *Suttanipāṭa*, lines 11-14. Cf. Wezler 1978, 101.

15. Alsdorf 1962, 568, n. 1. Also Wezler 1978, 99.

16. Alsdorf 1962, 577, n. 3, followed by Schmidt 1968, 638-39. Also Wezler 1978, 99.

17. Restrictions for this category of 'lifestyle' were formulated in various prescriptive texts; see for example, Schmidt 1968, 638-39, and in the texts of *Gautama* 3.31 and *Baudhāyana* 2.6.11.15; both texts refer to the meat of animals killed by beasts of prey, such as *baiṣka*.

18. Wezler 1978.

the footsteps of his teacher Alsdorf, surmises the probability that some forest-dwellers partook of meat daily and did so without engaging in any killing at all. Wezler corroborates this further with reference to MBh 12.236.7,¹⁹ in which the forest-dweller, while performing his *pañcayajña* duties, should offer different ingredients to those of a householder (*grhastha*). Therefore, he should not offer the cultivated variety of grains but, rather, wild rice (*nīvara*), as well as remnants of meat from wild animals, as a substitute for the flesh of domesticated animals. In fact, the praxis of the ascetic penance of fasting may correspond to intervals between the irregular discovery of animal carcasses or other food items. One could say that fasting is part of the lifestyle of ascetics by necessity, as food is not regularly available under conditions which dictate that any effort towards securing necessary items for one's livelihood, especially any effort involving killing, is undesirable.

There was possibly a tenuous influence from Vedic sacrifice, in which certain acts of sacrifice (*karman*)²⁰ were performed, and the 'leavings' were then distributed as food, later and till the present day known as *prasāda*. In the context of the certain Brahmanic groups who gave up the householder's effort at procuring a livelihood and hence did not engage in activities/actions for their subsistence, they either lived on what was available in the forest or by receiving alms or even 'donations' from local chieftains, etc. As such outside support may not always have been available, life in the wilderness had to be self-sustaining. But this is evidently so not only for ascetics but also for exiles, be they the protagonists of the Epics or even messengers and accompanying troops or other members of the retinue of whomsoever.

The dietary restrictions we can observe in the literature of ancient India and also directly in modern times are a very complex and unwieldy matter.²¹ A straightforward answer cannot but elude us, but an attempt at bettering comprehension may help advance the discussion on the issue. The post-Vedic evidence available to us reveals the interchange and certain dependence of ideas on both the Vedic and the Brahmanic traditions. The sudden appearance of concepts such as *ahiṃsā* suggests that its influence might have been far less than often suggested. As Hanns-Peter Schmidt²² observed, there is no tangible connection between *ahiṃsā* and abstaining from meat, since the mendicants who begged for their alms ate whatever was offered to them, meat included.

Continuing the inquiry into a diet obtained without any personal effort and without deliberate engagement in its procurement, Brahmanical records from

19. Reading as follows: *akṛṣṭaṃ vai vṛhiyavaṃ nīvaraṃ vighasāni ca / havīṃṣi samprayaccheta makheṣvatrāpi pañcasu //*.

20. The work of the sacrificer had to be performed with the greatest precision so that no wrong outcome would ensue, be it drought or other grave misfortune.

21. Olivelle and others have done work in this area, drawing on *śāstra*, *sūtra*, and other texts.

22. Schmidt 1968, 626, claims that Alsdorf actually lost sight of the difference between *ahiṃsā* and vegetarianism.

approximately the same time period as the previously mentioned sources can be used to somewhat round out our limited understanding of the early forces influencing dietary habits.

Beyond the *Dharmaśāstras* sources, texts on the topic of food are as diverse as Pāṇini's *Aṣṭadhyāyī*, Kātyāyana, the already-mentioned Buddhist *Jātakas* tales, with the *Vinaya Piṭaka*, and the medical sources *Caraka-* and *Suśruta-Saṃhitās*, to name but a few. Needless to say, both the Epics – the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* – include food narratives, which can elicit surprise and present controversy. The Epics portray a variety of foodstuffs and in some instances even provide something like recipes. In the *Mahābhārata*, we find *piṣṭaudana*, a dish consisting of rice and minced/ground meat and spices.²³ This is mentioned when Duryodhana is fussing and expressing his dissatisfaction over the Pāṇḍavas' well-being and affluence. To quell his jealousy, his father Dhṛtarāṣṭra gives a list of items that attest to Duryodhana's lavish lifestyle, and *piṣṭaudana* is one of these; it was apparently considered a delicacy or even a comfort food. Likewise, we find similar ingredients in the *Rāmāyaṇa* in the recipe for *māṃsabhūtodana*, venison cooked with rice and vegetables and spices, supposedly a favorite of Sītā's.²⁴

In both Epics, there are a number of particular books (*parvans* or *kāṇḍas*), which, more than any others, encourage us to look for dietary habits, adjustments, and adoptions. Such books include the *Vanaparvan* and *Virāṭaparvan* in the *Mahābhārata* and the *Āraṇyakāṇḍa*, etc., in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and depict the protagonists during their exile years, not only in the wilderness but also when they resided with their hosts, in short, away from their usual dwelling. But of course, even when they were residing at home, cf. *Bālakāṇḍa* and *Āyodhyākāṇḍa*, information regarding food is still to be found.

Yudhiṣṭhira's narratives in the *Mahābhārata* indicate the nature of his and his company's sustenance. *Vanaparvan* 3.2.7 portrays Yudhiṣṭhira sustaining himself and his immediate family on fruit, roots, and meat (*phalamūlāmiṣāhāra*, 3.2.2),²⁵ and also discusses the availability of these foods in the wilderness when they **ended up in exile** due to Yudhiṣṭhira's having gambled everything away. In this case his concern was that he would not be able to provide for the Brahmins who insisted on accompanying him, and he finds it unbearable to agree to their suggestion that they fend for themselves (3.2.13). Unlike the solitary king in the commentary on the *Suttanipāṭa*, Yudhiṣṭhira's brothers are the ones who are actively engaged in hunting antelope here, a circumstance that poses no problem for Yudhiṣṭhira. Then, one night he has a dream in which a small herd of antelopes/deer come to him and petition him to leave the particular forest,

23. Ghosh 1876, Vol. 2, 322; Achaya 1994, 54, follows Ghosh as does Om Prakash 1987.

24. Om Prakash 1987, 188.

25. Wezler 1978, 99. In *Mahābhārata* 3.2.8, a synonymous phrase, *phalamūlamrga*, is used.

known as Dvaitavana.²⁶ The Pāṇḍavas and their adherents who dwelt in this forest had slaughtered all their kith and kin, and the animals wanted their kind to have a chance at survival. The next day, Yudhiṣṭhira discussed the issue with his brothers and they all set out to move to the Kāmyaka forest. On their way, they ate sweet corn and drank fresh water.

We find descriptions of food items, vessels for preparing food, and narratives of famous cooks, including the well-known King Nala²⁷ (*Mahābhārata* 3.73.20), who, despite his disguise, is recognized by his wife when she tastes the meat he had cooked and flavoured. King Nala must have cooked, or even just flavoured the meat on occasions, otherwise, at the end of her long search, his wife would never have been able to recognize him just by the flavours he had used in the meat dish. Furthermore Prince Bhīmasena (*Virāṭaparvan* 4.2.7 and 4.7.5), who identified himself as a cook of soups and sauces, operated as a butcher as well (*Mahābhārata* 4.2.7).²⁸ Moreover, we find many references to food in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and even to a royal cook for Rāma and Sītā. While they were in exile, Lakṣmaṇa, Rama's younger brother of Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa, cooked for all three of them for many years.

Om Prakash, in his *Economy and Food...* provides numerous examples of meat consumption in both the Epics²⁹ and also in many other sources. For example, Sītā's favourite was a dish of rice cooked with venison.³⁰

From the literature dating to after the middle of the first millennium, there is plenty of evidence to show that dietary habits included eating meat and drinking wine, which was specifically a regular practice for royalty, be they male or female. The partaking of meat as part of the diet in and around the royal court is corroborated first of all by lifestyle. Lifestyle and custom included royal hunting expeditions, during periods of exile, as in both the Epics, and also during military or various other campaigns, as well as during expeditions accompanying the *aśvamedha* horse, or even intelligence-gathering expeditions.

By the way, in the above-mentioned exceedingly detailed work by Om Prakash, there is an instance in which he misconstrues the term *kīlālaja*, rendering it only as *kīlāla*, and thus categorizing it as an intoxicating drink, somehow oblivious of the suffix *-ja*, which changes the meaning of the term from a drink

26. *Mahābhārata* 3.244.2 ff. A similar request to change the Pāṇḍavas' dwelling place appeared earlier, and on this occasion was requested by Vyāsa himself, 3.37.31.

27. There is a literature called '*Pākā*' this or that, for example *Pākadarpaṇa*. This *Pākadarpaṇa* is ascribed to a king in an *upākhyāna* (substory) in the *Mahābhārata*, known by the name of Nala. He is well-remembered as a skillful cook, especially of meat, and more specifically for its flavouring/dressing. The *Pākadarpaṇa* is of a late date (not established). See a recent study by the German scholar, Heike Gilbert (Gilbert 1997).

28. The term *ārālīka* was understood by van Buitenen 1978, 28 and Olivelle 2014, 480, etc., as a meat cook or butcher.

29. Om Prakash 1987, 183-220.

30. *Ibid.*, 188.

to meat.³¹ Two things have happened here; first, the suffix *-ja* has not been considered, and then the verb that follows the noun is from the root *khād/khādeyam* (potential/optative/*vidhi liṇ*) with a negative *na*. In other words, the item *kīlāla-ja* should not be eaten. If this were a beverage, why would it be prohibited from being eaten and not drunk?

The misread word occurs in the narrative about Karna, who is an important figure in the *Mahābhārata*, since it can be argued that he is the core protagonist of the Epic and according to some the initial panegyric of a fallen hero.³² He is often called the only ‘tragic’ character in premodern Indian literature. The context of the discussed truncated term *kīlālaja* is of a promise and a vow made by Karna soon after he was knighted by Duryodhana, following a skirmish with Arjuna, and really with all the Pāṇḍavas. Karna swears to kill the Pāṇḍavas and takes a vow pledging to give up meat, after which he specifically promises to follow an *asura* (Titan?) vow.³³ This afore-mentioned pledge indicates some contradiction in his views. Karna takes a vow not to eat meat until he has killed the Pāṇḍavas, and Arjuna in particular.³⁴ In other words, he will abjure the eating of meat, as part of a penance, but also to motivate himself. He also takes the ‘*asura* vow’, even though it is not entirely clear what this vow entails. But at the very least, it is clear that his renouncement of meat eating thereby giving up his customary habit. By having been accepted by Duryodhana as kin, as mentioned above, Karna must also have shared in dining, etc., in addition to the fighting. He lived at the court of the Kauravas, who partook of both meat and liquor, as was customary for the warrior class.

Karna’s contradictory attitude towards meat eating can be observed in the *Karna-parvan*. After a berating by his charioteer, Śalya,³⁵ he gives the latter a

31. *Ibid.*, 203. Cf. Monier-Williams 1982 (orig. 1899), giving ‘meat’ for *kīlālaja*.

32. Carroll Smith 1992, who argues that on the basis of her metrical analysis of the *Mahābhārata*, not only can we observe the *ksatriya* world but perhaps see the Epic in its pre-brahmanized form. She argues that parts of the *Karna-parvan* form the kernel of the panegyric for a fallen warrior, whom we know as Karna. In modern times, Karna is definitely the darling of the nation, in the different strata of society.

33. *Mahābhārata* (Vulgate), *Vanaparvan*, 3.257.17. Although in Om Prakash’s bibliography the reference for section 5.2. is the Critical Edition of the *Mahābhārata*, the reference in the example is from the Vulgate edition of the *Mahābhārata*. This verse is not included in the Critical Edition of the *Mahābhārata*, but does exist in the Vulgate. Om Prakash’s references are not easily traceable.

34. *Ibid.*, 3.257.17-18 (for *athotkuṣṭam*, I prefer to read *athotkrṣṭa*, ‘to tear asunder’): *kīlālajam na khādeyam kariṣye cāsuravratam / nāstīti naiva vakṣyāmi yācito yena kenacit // athotkuṣṭam maheṣvāsair dhārtarāṣṭrair mahārathaiḥ / pratijñāte phālgunasya vadhe karṇena samyuge //*

35. Śalya unwittingly had fallen into the trap Duryodhana had set up for him, as he made his way to give support to the Pāṇḍavas. Duryodhana had deliberately set up rest-stops with refreshments, etc., along the route of Śalya’s journey. As a result of the mistaken source of hospitality, Śalya was obliged to serve on the Kaurava (Duryodhana’s) side. Yudhiṣṭhira exploited the confusing situation and instructed Śalya to work in a covert fashion for the Pāṇḍava side by demoralizing Karna, by driving Karna’s war wagon, and by ranting insults at Karna.

dose of his own medicine, scolding him in turn, and depicting the despicable behaviour of certain people. The target of Karna's malice/verbal vendetta is the Bāl̥hika people, and his aim is to belittle the inappropriate behaviour of women from the general area to which Śalya belongs, the Madra country. His deprecating speech includes blame for meat eating and liquor drinking. Was this really Karna's judgment of the women's behaviour, or was he making rhetorical use of a common custom? Elsewhere in the *Mahābhārata* i.e., in the *Virāṭaparvan*, Sudeśnā, Virāṭa's wife, sends Sairandhrī (the disguised Draupadī) to get wine, so that Sudeśnā, as she says: 'would not die of thirst'.³⁶

The prohibition on eating animal flesh is strongly associated with South Asian (Indian) customs and beliefs, to such an extent that in the USA, most of the time, Indian cuisine and diet are equated with vegetarianism. What a misleading notion! It may be useful to examine some of the presuppositions. The frequent question concerning the origins of these prohibitions is mostly at the speculative stage. I am firmly convinced that there is no precise historical moment or event we could point to. Rather, a number of factors contributed to the spread of the idea and thenceforth the custom, as discussed in the translation of Ludwig Alsdorf's study *The History of Vegetarianism and Cow-Veneration in India*.³⁷ Magico-sacrificial fear and concern for purity versus pollution seem to be the early determining factors. Cows were not listed among the animals that could not be eaten. For the priests (Brahmans) partaking in the consumption of the sacrificial offerings, the distribution of the specific parts of the sacrificed animal was regulated, so that there was a certain order in the distribution of the meat. Importantly, the priest who appeased or 'quieted' the sacrificial animal ate last.³⁸

Perhaps the changes can be phrased in this way: the disruption of the Vedic ritual that resulted in the abandonment of animal sacrifice consequently led to the substitution of surrogates, such as rice balls, for animals. Economic needs, such as avoiding using up one's capital, along with other factors, must have contributed considerably in this process.

An analysis of the development of food culture in the second half of the first millennium BCE, albeit in broad strokes, allows us to surmise that novel cultural influences arising from contact with settled populations were at work, which led to a varying amount of mutual assimilation. At the same time, it is also assumed that large swaths of population were unaffected by this cultural contact for an extremely long period. But if we consider where there was a custom of eating meat, the infiltrating changes, e.g., as manifested in the case of

36. *Mahābhārata* (Vulgate), 4.14.10: *sudeśnovāca, uttiṣṭha gaccha sairandhrī kīcakasya niveśanam / pānam ānaya kalyāṇī pipāsā mām bādhyate //*.

37. See also Bollée's introductory matter to Alsdorf 2010 (orig. 1962) and Heesterman 1966, a review of Alsdorf 1962.

38. Heesterman 1966, Appendix I, 92 in Ludwig Alsdorf 2010.

Áśoka, made permanent inroads in affecting that custom. Furthermore the mendicants, ascetics, etc., of the *śramaṇa* culture, in short, those who gave up their station in society and family life were no longer involved in procuring food by growing, hunting, selling or buying it, etc., as people engaged in society normally were. As seen for example in the above mentioned offerings of wild grains and the remnants of wild kills, the sources of food stuff for these *śramaṇas* were neither cultivated nor domesticated. They themselves partook of the wild grain and at the same time opportunistically consumed meat when available. One could say they went about their sustenance in a passive way, making use of the leavings of animals of prey, avoiding any decisive actions that would make them accrue karmic traces.

The offering of sacrificial animals and the eating of meat, or the contrary, developed into a moral issue over time. The scholar R. Mitra was ostracized for writing an article called *Beef in Ancient India*,³⁹ which showed how much value was attached to the bovine species, and how integrated it was with the most important facets of society, particularly the Vedic sacrificial ritual, in which the priest not only officiated but also participated in consuming the sacrificed animal. As is generally known, cows were a substantial part of a community's capital, as they invariably provided sustenance and a currency. Hence, the use of bovines for sacrifice was truly a sacrifice, as it meant giving up a part of the community's livelihood, as well as a portion of its bartering or purchasing power. Related to this was the need to preserve the community's capital without large fluctuations, as there was an increased tendency to regard domesticated animals as accountable property and hence, necessarily subject to controlled use. This was important for stabilizing the society, as food scarcity was always a threat.

The *Mahābhārata*, one of our post-Vedic witnesses, documents some of the changes in the attitude toward the Vedic ritual, a change which actually took place on the ground under the influence of competing religious beliefs and sentiments, such as those of the Buddhists, the Jains, and the Abhirs.⁴⁰ In some groups, sacrificing an animal or eating meat became an insurmountable moral issue. A. Chakrabarti⁴¹ discusses some of the problems, but sees no difference between killing for sacrifice or hunting which provides meat for consumption, on the one hand, and something like 'road kill', on the other, which is really what is left after the wild animals have had their fill or the meat freely given to mendicants on their begging rounds amongst the laity. In both of these latter instances, food is obtained and made available without any deliberate effort or act involving killing being performed, in other words, without the act = *karman*

39. Mitra 1881. Mitra's fairly short study is based on a careful textual analysis of the Vedic texts. This did not deter Gita Press's publication of *A Review of Beef in Ancient India* by an anonymous author (Anonymous 1971), denying any meat presence or availability in this 'Review', providing counter arguments to each piece of textual evidence Mitra had provided.

40. Bhattacharya 1896, Ch. II, 296 ff.

41. Chakrabarti 1996, 262 ff.

which would make an indelible mark in the karmic store. The crux of the matter here is in not being proactive – in not acting in the customary way which, with time indeed becomes the bottom line for the moral system advocated for religious goals and shared by the Brahmins, Buddhists, Jains, and others in South Asian society. It is not necessarily an expression of compassion or non-violence, but, rather, a concern with reincarnation.

Again, in contrast with popular opinion today, the radical adjustments made to the Vedic sacrifice were not necessarily caused by the abstention from meat on the part of the early Jains and the Buddhists. It is more likely that both these groups' opposition to the elitist and exclusionary practices of the Brahmanical ritualistic tradition may have led to the abandonment of that part of the ritual where the most precious possession was sacrificed. Vedic and post-Vedic literature and inscriptions allow us to extrapolate that restrictions on eating meat were not always a consistent process.

In retrospect, as we discuss customs and other issues, we can say that, although the term remains unchanged, action (*karman*) has undergone a radical shift as a concept, and also as a practice, closely reflecting changes in society and the value system. Most importantly, it became a term for expressing a relation of causality between cause and effect, which formed the cornerstone for a variety of developments in religious traditions.

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